Title: 'Natya' versus 'Theatre': A Comparative Study of Post-Independent Theatre Practices in West Bengal and Bangladesh

Name of Scholar : Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

Supervisor: Professor Abhijit Sen

Registration number is [VB-1951 of 2014-15.

Date of registration: 23.09.2014

The development of the tradition of Bengali Theatre can be divided into two sections: the first, '*Bangla Natya'*, may be seen as comprising the ongoing traditional folk forms like '*Leelakirtana*', '*Paalagaan*', '*Charyapad*', '*Panchali*', and many other social and religious rituals. And the second, '*Bengali Theatre*', is what started with Lebedeff in 1795 with the translations of foreign plays as well as Sanskrit plays and later on the presentations of original Bengali plays, largely influenced by foreign theatrical tradition. Apart from these, the plays by Rabindranath Tagore and his productions can be discussed as a '*Parallel Theatre Tradition*'. The main objective of this work is to make a comparative study of the development of Europe-influenced theatre in the two Bengals (West Bengal and East Pakistan/ Bangladesh) since the 19th century and the other Bengali theatre that developed under the direct influence of the traditional forms since the 1970s and which, unfortunately, has not been assigned its due status as *Bangla Natya* but has rather been seen as part of '*Bengali Theatre*'.

The first mention of ancient *Bangla Natya* can be traced to *Natya Shastra* by Bharata. *Natya Shastra* marks four *Prabritti,* according to the area, language and rituals. This tradition of thousand years, unlike the Western, is not confined to only the style of character acting with a clear demarcation from ritualistic narrative. Its development has roots in *songs, panchali, leela, geet, geetanat, pala, pat, jatra, alkap, gambhira, ghatu, hastor, mangalnat, Gaz'si song* and so on. "The popular way of presentation during the Middle Ages was *panchali*. Then the appearance of Chaitanyadeva and his teaching of total submission to Lord Krishna created a new conciliation between life and society which challenged the existing social norms. As a result, new art forms stepped in, replacing the old ones, which were worn out through overused conventions. With the influence of Shri Chaitanya and his religious practices, many creations like *Charitakhyan, Leelanatya,Vaishnav Padabali* and many scriptures were introduced to Bengali literature. Along with these, there was the *Natyaleela* of Prabhu Nityananda, produced by Shri Chaitanya that is mentioned in the *Bhagabata Purana*. There are hints of rehearsals, costumes, stage, stage-decorations on the one hand and characterization, delivering dialogues, acting on the other.

My objective is not to give a detailed account of the development of this theatrical tradition of thousand years. But with the brief historical description, I want to point out the fact that our theatrical tradition has a long history and that it is not merely a Europe-influenced one. The history of any art form always follows a chronological order and bridges the past and the

present in terms of time and space. But unfortunately, most books on the history of Bengali Theatre, apart from few exceptions, mark its beginning with the sudden upheavals caused by the impact of Western theatre in the 19th century.

Now we will come to '*Bengali Theatre*'. For the period concerned in my work (the two Bengals after the Partition in 1947), a brief account of the development of *Bengali Theatre* in the 19th century needs to be presented. The establishment of the first 'real' theatre house (in Western pattern) by a Bengali was at the Narikeldanga Bungalow of Prasanna Kumar Thakur, inaugurated on 28th December, 1831. The inaugural performances were an excerpt of Shakespeare's *Julius Ceasar* and a translation of Bhabavuti's *Uttar Ramcharit* by Wilson in English. Actually that was the period of imitation by the educated Bengali. Transcending the boundary of being influenced, they tried to incorporate the 'foreignness' within their own culture. Though Prasanna Kumar Thakur named his theatre house 'Hindu Theatre', the expected audiences were the foreigners and the native English-educated people.

Anyway, it is difficult to measure how much these Sanskrit-influenced or translated Bengali plays enriched the theatrical art form of Bengal, but they certainly gave rise to a new artistic clash between Shakespeare and the Indian poet Kalidasa on Bengali stage. Then, for a long time we could see the Sanskrit-influenced or translated Bengali plays presented in Western style and acting forms. In this period of translations from English and Sanskrit plays, some playwrights like Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Dinabandhu Mitra began to write original Bengali plays. Madhusudan Dutta's first play 'Sharmistha' paved the path of union between the Eastern and the Western which later on was considered as the mainstream trend that can be termed as 'transculturation', where Indian stories were being performed in Western forms. Then the age of the Public Theatre arrived. In due course of time, Bengali theatre came into close contact with society, politics and religion. From this time, theatre came in close contact with the national struggle for freedom.

In this topsy-turvy period of the Bengali theatre, Rabindranath Tagore made his appearance. When entire Bengal was busy in tug-of-war between European, Sanskrit and original Bengali plays, public and amateur theatres, Rabindranath isolated himself from it all and started his 'experimentations' in the different spheres of literary and performative art at Santiniketan. Following the old tradition of *Bangla Natya*, he gave birth to a new trend in Bengali theatre that was equipped with a perfect amalgamation between the poetic and the dramatic, symbolism and elaboration, poetic dialogues and hidden dramatic conflicts which made him a timeless great. Unfortunately, he has not left any written account of his thoughts on theatre except an essay, an introduction to a book and few letters and interviews. He has expressed his grievances against the public theatre in his essay 'Rangamancha'(1903).

Another phase of changes appeared with the World War and the great famine. Professional theatre began to lose its grasp on the cultural life of Bengal. Native theatre spread its wings with *'Gana Natya Movement'*. With this *Gana Natya* (People's Theatre) Movement, the development of Bengali theatre stepped into free India. "With the production of Bijan Bhattacharya's 'Nabanna' on 24th October, 1944 at Shrirangam stage, the journey of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA, 1942) started" (Subir Roy Chowdhury 76). Before Independence in 1947, the general issue was the clash between common mass and British imperialism. Indian National Congress became the ruling party in India after the end of the

British rule. In Bengal (West Bengal), the unmitigated tension between the bourgeoisie and the working class came to the forefront.

From the very beginning IPTA had the motto of focussing on class-struggle. But after Independence many stalwarts concentrated on artistry, instead of the main objective of IPTA. The theatre, not the politics, gained dominance. Consequently, within one year of Independence the IPTA Movement lost its way. Immediately a new movement called *'Nabanatya'* (New Theatre) replaced *'Gananatya'* (People's Theatre) with a belief that arousing mass consciousness was an important thing, but not the only thing. It can be said that *Nabanatya* Movement was developed as a challenge to the notion of total submission to politics of People's Theatre Movement.

Now we may take a look at East Pakistan, between the Partition of 1947 and its emergence as Bangladesh in 1971.There was no such impact of IPTA movement in the theatre of East Bengal (then East Pakistan). So there was neither any marked development of political theatre nor any modern concept of script writing and theatre productions. One obvious fact is that before 1947 there was not only the scarcity of productions in the Eastern part of Bengal but also there was no conscious and united effort to use theatre as a medium of revolution. When much experimentation with the modernity of this art were going on in Kolkata, then the entire Western part of Bengal was busy in *Tusu, Bhadu, Leto, Gambhira, Alkap,* and the Eastern part was engaged in the folk forms like *MadarPirer Gaan, Gazi Kalur Kichha, Gambhira, Alkap, Baul* and so on. The theatre movements in Kolkata had no such impact in the villages because of the physical distance as well as differences in religious outlook. As the Eastern part was Muslim dominated, the flourishing of theatre staggered due to religious taboos before and after the partition of 1947, but the folk forms were a part and parcel of the lives of common people; consequently there were no religious and political interventions / interruptions in these art forms. Probably this circumstance prevented Kolkata-theatre to make any notable mark in the eastern part of Bengal. During the period from the Partition in 1947 and the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the people of East Pakistan/Bangladesh were so involved in their struggle for freedom that they did not pay heed to any other interests like theatre.

The real essence of a nation does not lie in its territorial recognition but in its language and culture. The reason behind this argument is that the quest for re-establishing *Bangla Natya* in independent Bangladesh had its root probably in the Language Movement of 1952. The nation itself was created in its quest for securing the language and culture. So, the decade of the 70s saw an overwhelming search for language and folk culture in Bangladesh. Consequently the theatre after the struggle for freedom always reminds us of the Bengali existence. Its chief proponent was Selim Al Deen. But, it was not the only form of theatre in Bangladesh, rather it was a parallel development along with the highly acclaimed *Group Theatre* Movement, influenced from West Bengal. In the late 80s, *Natya* was able to gain the status of a full-fledged form of Bengali Theatre and started being considered as an alternative trend to the Group Theatre.

On the other hand, in the early 70s the Sangeet Natak Akademi by Indian government engaged itself in reviving 'Indian culture' throughout the country including West Bengal, though initially having a political agenda. So the development of theatre in West Bengal largely depended on the survival strategy of the Group Theatre, not merely in the quest for its own cultural root. A visible demarcation was made in the development of theatre in the two

apparently ‘similar’ lands – Bangladesh and West Bengal, in term of expressing their cultural bents, be it in writing or in performing plays.The aim of this work is a comparative study of traditionally enriched *Bangla Natya* and Europe-influenced *Bangla Theatre* in the two Bengals. Moreover, we will try to keep our attention focussed on the evolution of theatrical presentation in the perspective of our own land, Bengal.

Bibliography

Al Deen, Selim. *Madhya Yuger Bangla Natya* [Bengali Performances of the Medieval Period]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1996.

Arko, Yusuf Hassan. *Bangladesher Oitijhobahi Natto ‘Palagan’: AngikBichar O Bornakarir OnosthanOnushondhan* [‘Palagan’, A Traditional Theatre of Bangladesh: A Quest of Narrator’s Stand-Point in Performance]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, Apr. 2018.

Bandyopadhyay, BrajendraNath. *Bangio Natyashalar Itihash: 1795 to 1876* [The History of BengaliTheatre Stage: 1795 to 1876].7th ed.,Kolkata, Bangio Sahitya Parishad, 2011.

Bhattacharya, Asutosh. *Folklore of Bengal*. reprint. New Delhi, National Book Trust, 2007.

Chowdhury, Rahman. *Rajnoitik Natyacinta O Swadhinata Poroborti Bangladesher Monchonatok* [Theatre in Politics and the Theatre of Bangladesh after Independence War]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 2007.

Chattapadhyay, Alaka, translator.*Churashi Siddhar Kahini* [Stories of 84 Saints]. Anushtup ed., Kolkata, Anushtup, June 2010.

Chowdhury, Darshan. *Bangla Theatre-r Itihash* [The History of Bangla Theatre]. 6th ed. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, Nov 2016.

Chowdhury, Subir Roy, and Swapan Majumdar, editors.*Bilati Jatra Theke Swadeshi Theatre* [From European Jatra to Indian Theatre]. Kolkata,Dey’s Publishing, 1999.

Das, Nirmal. *Charyageeti Parikrama* [A Textual Criticism of the Old Bengali Charya Lyrics]. 11th ed., Kolkata,Dey’s Publishing, Oct. 2016.

Ghosh, Ajit Kumar. *Bangla Nataker Itihas*[The History of Bangla Drama]. 5th ed., Kolkata, Dey’s Publishing, Sep. 2016.

Hossain, Salina. *Neel Mayure rJauban* [The Youth of the Blue Peacock]. Kolkata,NayaUdyog, 2009.

Hoque, Mofidul. “Bangladesher Natok” [Theatres of Bangladesh].*Dui Banglar Theatre*

[The Theatre of two Bengals]. Edited by Serlim Reza Sentu, Bogra, Sakuntala Prokashoni, 1999,pp. 41-56.

Islam, Ahmed Aminul. *Moymonsingher Oittijjhobahi Nattya: Gothon O Poribeshonareeti* [Traditional Drama of Mymensingh: Structure and Style of Performance]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, May 2010.

Jaker, Ali. 1979. "Swadhinata Yudha o Amader Natok" [Independent War and Our Theatre]. *Theatre*. Edited by RamenduMajumdar, Dhaka, Theatre Publishing, 1979,pp. 85-92.

Khatun,Shahida, and Saymon Zakaria, editors.*Behular Nachari* [Traditional Dance drama of Behula].Dhaka, Bangla Academy, June 2016.

Khatun, Shahida, and SaymonZakaria, editors.*MadarPirerGaan* [Mystic Song of MadarPir]. Dhaka,Bangla Academy, June 2016.

Lipon, SydurRahman. *BangladesherLokonatteObhinoyPaddhoti* [Performance-Methods of Folk-Theatre in Bangladesh]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, May 2010.

Majumdar, Swpan. *Sat Dasaker Theatre O Anyanya* [Collection of Essays on Theatre]. Kolkata, Dey's Publishing, Apr. 1998.

Mamoon, Muntassir. *Unish Satake Daccar Theatre* [Nineteenth Century Dacca Theatre]. Dhaka, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, June 1979.

Mandal, Paresh Chandra, *Kalidasa as a Dramatist-A Study*.Dhaka, University of Dhaka, 1986.

Mitra, Santkumar, editor. *Bangla Gramin Loknatak: Alochona-o-Samgraha* [Bengali Village FolkDrama: Criticism & Collection]. 2nd ed., Kolkata,SahityaPrakash, Dec. 2015.

Mitra, Saoli. *Gononatya, Nobonatya, Sotnatya O Sombhu Mitra*. Kolkata,Ananda Publishers Private Limited, Jan. 2015.

Roy, Bishakha. *Third Theatre: Anya Swar, Anya Nirman* [Third Theatre: A Different Voice, A Different Making]. Kolkata,Thema, 2017.

Sanyal, Abantikumar. *BanglarAdi-Madhya Jug* [Ancient and Medieval Periods of Bengal]. Kolkata, Centre for Archaeological Studies and Training, Eastern India, 1998.

Sarkar, Obaidul Huq. *Pachash Dashoker Patra-Patrikay Dhakar Natok* [Stage Dramas of Dhaka in the Papers in 1950s]. Dhaka, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, June 1994.

Sarkar, Pabitra. *Nataker Sandhane* [A Collection of Critical Essays on Theatre]. Kolkata, Pratibhas, Apr. 2008.

Williams, Raymond. *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht*. Reprinted version, Penguin Books, 1976.

Zakaria, Saymon. *Prachin Banglar Buddha Natok* [Buddhist Theatre in Ancient Bengal]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, June 2007.

Zakaria, Saymon. *Baagladesher Lokonatok: Bisoy O Angik Boychitra* [Folk-Theatre in Bangladesh: Variation of Content and Phenomenon]. Dhaka, Bangla Academy, Apr. 2008.